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ABSTRACT

Intended for use in in-service instruction for preschool, kindergarten, and first-grade teachers, this publication addresses major issues related to student transition between grades. Contents reflect the practices, strategies, and ideas of discussants, who included principals, teachers and administrators who were members of a task force convened in South Carolina. Part I explores the origins of program differences. Part II focuses on terminology related to program continuity. Part III addresses policies that affect the progression of young children in school. Part IV provides strategies and practices that promote continuous learning. (RH)

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**Continuity of Learning
for Children Ages 4, 5, and 6
in South Carolina Public Schools**

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con-ti-nu-i-ty (kŏn'te-nōō'ē-tē, -nyōō'ē) n., pl. -ties. 1. The state or quality of being continuous. 2. An uninterrupted succession; unbroken course.

American Heritage Dictionary

INTRODUCTION

There is considerable controversy over the program likenesses and differences between preschool and kindergarten and kindergarten and first grade classrooms. The purpose of this publication is to address the major controversial issues. It is suggested that this publication be used as a focal point for inservice sessions or joint meetings of teachers working in preschool, kindergarten and first grades. An instructional television program of the same title is also available to be used in conjunction with this publication.

What provides a continuous learning progression for young children? Teachers and parents agree on the fact that this should occur between preschool, kindergarten, and first grade. They cannot always agree on what constitutes continuity. Is continuity the uninterrupted succession of chil-

dren in grades or the unbroken course of curriculum in a non-graded system? For the purpose of this publication, the definition must be the progression of children in a graded system; this is the system of public education in South Carolina.

A task force of principals, teachers, and administrators was convened to discuss the issues surrounding the smooth transition of children in the early years. This publication reflects the practices, strategies, and ideas discussed by this group. Part I discusses the origins of program differences and Part II focuses on terminology related to program continuity. Part III addresses the policies which impact on the progression of young children in school while Part IV of the booklet provides strategies and practices which promote the continuous learning process.

PART I

Origins of Program Differences

The first public school kindergarten opened by Dr. William Harris, superintendent of the St. Louis public schools, was directed by Susan Blow. At his resignation in 1880, Ms. Blow and her followers resigned their positions because the school board placed kindergarten under the elementary grade supervisors. They feared the formal influence of elementary education on kindergarten!

The age-old, 19th century argument of why or should kindergarten look different from first grade still exists in the most sophisticated schools. The national movement to provide universal kindergarten, full-day kindergarten, or preschool has heightened the concern over the differences in not just kindergarten and first grade but between preschool and kindergarten. This is especially true in states with long-standing kindergartens which have begun to look like first grade. For example, in Nebraska a long history of kindergarten is supported through the constitution and state law which affirms the entitlement of all five-year-olds to free public education. However, the Board of Education produced a "Kindergarten Position Statement" in 1984 because "a number of conflicting societal pressures and attitudes have caused changes in the focus of kindergarten programs."

Discussion in professional literature has also addressed the differences. Dr. David Elkind argues:

Early childhood education must be taken on its own terms. We do not teach the high school curriculum at the junior high

level or the junior high curriculum at the elementary school level, so why in the world should we teach the elementary curriculum at the preschool level?

... Early childhood education has its own curriculum, its own programs of teacher training, its own methods of evaluation and classroom management. These overlap curriculum, teacher training, evaluation, and classroom management at upper levels of schooling, but they are far from being identical.

Professional organizations have responded to the need for more program information for teachers and parents by producing position statements on appropriate practices. The National Association for the Education of Young Children position statement presents appropriate and inappropriate practices on thirteen program components including curriculum goals, teaching strategies, assessment, and parent-teacher relations. The Southern Association on Children Under Six, the International Reading Association, and the National Art Education Association also formulated statements on appropriate practices.

In South Carolina, the discussion of appropriate practices and program differences began with the planning of state pilot kindergarten programs in 1968 and continued with kindergarten expansion statewide. The discussion has been renewed with the passage of the Education Improvement Act of 1984 which provided for the phase-in of a statewide program for "at-risk"

four-year-olds. Through the process of clarifying curriculum likenesses and differences in classrooms for four-year-olds, five-year-olds, and six-year-olds for teachers, administrators,

and parents, the need has arisen to reexamine and make recommendations for reinforcing sound practices for young children.

PART II

Terminology Related to Program Continuity

"Taking early childhood on its own terms" as suggested by Dr. David Elkind means respecting the discipline, understanding terminology, and using appropriate terms in context; otherwise, the result is confusion and misunderstanding.

For instance, the catch-phrase, **getting children ready for school**, is often attributed to kindergarten as its singular purpose. With little understanding of what kindergarten can offer, this catch-phrase is interpreted to mean teaching children to sit down, to raise their hands to speak, and to work alone at desks. This is not learning--these are organizational procedures. It is not appropriate to expect kindergarten teachers to have children learn procedures for their next year's teacher. All teachers orient a new class annually to routines and procedures.

Getting ready for school is also used to set prerequisite skills children must learn for entry into first grade, such as naming letters and numerals and correct copying of names or words. Good preschools and kindergarten classrooms offer opportunities, materials, and support for learning these and many more skills as a result of the child's own motivation and interest. Instructional strategies based on narrowly focused curriculum goals that require rote learning, drill, and forced repetition to satisfy entry requirements do not constitute sound teaching practices. It is possible for children to parrot correct responses without understanding the underlying concepts. Good teachers, whether pre-

school, kindergarten, or first grade, adapt the curriculum to make school ready for each child's uniqueness rather than pressure children to become ready for school.

The use of the terms **formal**, **structured**, and **academic** to describe the acceleration of curriculum beyond the play-oriented atmosphere of kindergarten is a misnomer. Many experiential, play-oriented preschools, kindergartens, and first grades are highly structured and academic. The practice of placing children in private school kindergarten or first grade and later enrolling them in public school a year ahead of their peers is an example of false acceleration. The connotation of acceleration in terms like "above grade level" and "skipping grades" is rooted in traditional elementary school and should not be applied to early learning classrooms.

By the same token, borrowing the practice of using basal mathematics and reading workbooks in kindergarten does not accelerate children toward the first grade curriculum. Some experiential activities from teacher resource books do assist kindergarten teachers in matching the interest and ability of individual children or groups of children with challenging activities. First grade teachers who value a hands-on, child-initiated approach to learning, supported by the use of commercially produced or teacher-made print materials use workbooks prudently.

Another assumption expressed by teachers about curriculum that truly

prohibits a continuous learning process is the need to **cover the curriculum**. This implies separate content or knowledge to be learned by children at age four, at age five, and at age six. The misconceptions surrounding this expression far exceed its valid use. What is valid is the certainty with which children's interests and abilities occur in a predictable sequence.

The sequence occurs so predictably that the majority of children in an age group have certain abilities. Most five-year-olds have not attained the cognitive ability to conserve matter, but many six-year-olds have this ability. Most six-year-olds understand the symbolic representations of print in a meaningful context and begin to read. A set of basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics needed to expand these abilities have been defined in South Carolina, and the use of all skills are important to a balanced instructional approach. Using the entire set of skills is a valid use of the term, covering the curriculum. Having all six-year-olds read every story in every book from preprimer on or work every mathematics problem in a district-adopted text misrepresents covering the curriculum.

The same field trips, units, or themes may be utilized in classrooms with children of different ages. The learning

processes emphasized vary because children's interests and abilities are different. Duplication does not and will not occur if teachers understand and use the principles of child growth and development to select teaching strategies.

The duplication of curriculum or curriculum coverage is of great concern to parents whose children have attended preschool. Teachers should reassure parents that the curriculum changes as children change. The teacher should predict for parents the kinds of expanded, challenging activities children are likely to be engaged in next year.

Early childhood professionals repeat the expression **learning through play** to describe the natural learning process of children. To many parents and teachers, the phrase connotes a chaotic, non-instructional classroom. Clifford Alper clarifies the purpose of play by stating: "Only adults make the differentiation between work and play. Since play is children's work, they make no such differentiation, and neither should their teachers." The instructional benefits of play-styled activities in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade should be a topic annually discussed in parent meetings and teacher inservice workshops.

PART III

Impact of Policy

The challenge facing teachers of young children is to provide an experiential learning environment for a group of children with highly varied aptitudes, interests, and backgrounds. Early childhood classrooms are designed to empower teachers to meet that challenge. Thus, a child of any ability can progress in a graded system through his early years of schooling in a classroom of children the same age. **This is learning continuity.** Ironically, policies dealing with issues such as accreditation, class size, grouping, testing, and retention may appear to be roadblocks in the continuous learning process. A closer look at these issues may dispell those perceptions.

In the past, it was common to interpret the *Defined Minimum Program for South Carolina School Districts (DMP)* to mean teaching subject matter in isolation. The DMP outlines the number of minutes subjects should be taught. Unfortunately this has frequently come to mean isolated teaching of subject matter, which was not its intent. **Accreditation standards should be interpreted to allow integrated teaching of subject matter in meaningful whole units.** This is especially true for young children.

Updating the continuous assessment process in a management system and using test results to improve instruction should compliment good teaching strategies. These measures should not be interpreted as a directive to teach isolated skills, rather to guide teachers in planned observations of children at work through which acquisition of specific skills is

noted. This is in keeping with the intent of the Basic Skills Assessment Program and the position of the National Association of Education for Young Children on standardized testing as stated, in part:

... tests should be used only when it is clear that their use represents a meaningful contribution to the improvement of instruction for children and only as one of many sources of information. . . . The potential for misdiagnosing or mislabeling is particularly great with young children where there is wide variation in what may be considered normal behavior.

Within the half-day, double-session program, a kindergarten teacher may have as many as sixty children and sixty sets of parents with whom to communicate each year. The class sizes for four-year-olds and compensatory first grades of fewer than twenty children are more manageable. Many agree that a reduction of kindergarten class size would enhance the quality of kindergarten; but this is not yet a reality. **Kindergarten teachers must streamline strategies used to communicate with parents, manage children's daily classroom activities, keep records, and make daily lesson plans which will strengthen their programs within existing class-size standards.** For example, teachers should initiate one parent orientation meeting and one conference per child per year, though two or more are generally preferred. Progress reports, if necessary, should only be used in conjunction with the

parent conference. Monthly newsletters are an efficient method of communicating classroom news and special events to all parents.

Time-consuming practices such as classroom management systems requiring constant monitoring during "center time," assessment techniques requiring a check-off of every child's every activity, or construction of decorative displays (i.e., bulletin boards) which do not require involvement of children should be eliminated. These practices do not allow a teaching team the time and flexibility necessary to facilitate an integrated experiential curriculum.

Some grouping practices, such as extra-year readiness or developmental classes and retention in the early years, are in conflict with the definition of the continuity of learning as previously stated. In a graded system, children of any ability progress through the early years in a classroom with children the same age. Children tracked into extra-year readiness classes or retained in grade are placed in age-different classrooms the following year with children of a younger age. Current research suggests such traditional practices need reevaluation.

A rationale for heterogeneous grouping and the elimination of extra-year programs (sometimes referred to as transitional first grade) is presented in a position statement by the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education. This rationale is based on the work of Bredekamp (1987), Goodlad and Anderson (1987), Gredler (1984) and Slavin (1986).

The dramatic growth of extra-year programs represents an at-

tempt by the educational system to cope with an escalating kindergarten curriculum and the varied backgrounds of entering children. However, these programs often increase the risk of failure for children who come to school with the educational odds against them. Selection and placement in "transitional," "developmental," or "readiness" classes often brand the children as failures in their own eyes and those of parents, peers, and teachers. . . . Heterogeneous class groupings are more likely to encourage growth for lower-functioning children than are homogeneous ones. Experiences within the regular classroom should be organized so that differences among children are valued rather than being viewed as a barrier to effective instruction.

Additional evidence contradicting current policies is summarized in the conclusions of Shepard and Smith on the effects of kindergarten and first grade retention:

... By the time they complete first grade, children who have repeated kindergarten do not outperform comparison students; they do, however, have slightly more negative feelings about school. There is no achievement benefit in retaining a child in kindergarten or first grade and, regardless of how well the extra year is presented to the child, the child still pays an emotional cost.

The aforementioned findings were carefully selected to represent a growing body of research predicated on sound educational theory and prac-

tice. If, indeed, policies affecting programs for young children conflict with these findings, what then? The question of conflict is not settled so easily. Many educators are skeptical about the findings of Shepard and Smith because past research and experience promoted the value of retention. Shepard and Smith disagree with the premise of past research that children achieve better when retained.

The question "What then?" is asked not to suggest policy changes but to encourage discussion on how policies are developed and what can be done to bring about change. There is no guarantee that if all policies supported continuity that continuity would exist. There are many opportunities to promote the continuous learning process within each classroom and in each school. Policies cannot be ignored nor used as excuses.

PART IV

Strategies and Practices

In the teaching profession, classroom practices must be congruent with an agreed-upon set of premises about how children learn; in other words, a teaching philosophy. Programs for children ages four, five, and six should have similarities based on a sound early childhood philosophy to insure program continuity. Teachers must be knowledgeable of appropriate practices and able to articulate the reasons why they do what they do. Premises for the following practices and strategies are bolded and presented in an effort to provide a common framework for child development, kindergarten, and first grade teachers.

Children are unique, whole human beings who need to see themselves as competent and responsible individuals—able to make choices and have control over situations in which they are involved. Young children are beginners and must be allowed to construct their own knowledge from experience.

- Adopt a "Come As You Are" philosophy in programs for four-, five-, and six-year-olds in which each child is accepted for what he can do. Avoid judging each child's worth based on rigid expectations or test scores.
- Re-think the use of discipline systems which include a multitude of rules to enforce with accompanying punishments.
- Enhance children's natural curiosity and encourage self-control by setting up activities which they can initiate on their own in meaningful ways.

- Acknowledge children's apprehension about moving from one program into another, and schedule time for them to visit in classrooms where they will be working in the future.

The learning environment, inside the classroom and the world beyond, must be utilized by teachers to achieve curriculum goals. It must be organized to include a multitude of concrete materials that are accessible to children.

- Select reusable and child-made materials (i.e., books) as well as commercial materials. Share materials with preschool, kindergarten, and first grade classrooms.
- Use furnishings and space arrangements that offer opportunities for large group, small group, and individual learning situations. Tables might be substituted for individual desks.
- Reevaluate the use of abstract curriculum materials such as workbooks, ditto sheets, flashcards, etc. These should be avoided with four- and five-year-olds and used in first grade to reinforce meaningful experiences.

The process of achieving all curriculum goals is predicated on the active involvement of children in daily activities. Children learn from whole events, whole situations, and whole experiences.

- Provide a balance of child-initiated and teacher-initiated instruction occurring in the classroom on a predictable daily basis.

- Avoid a curriculum full of one-right-answer activities. Plan open-ended activities and questions which allow for various solutions and answers.
- Study the skills presented in the early levels of the basal programs and devise appropriate experience-based strategies to accomplish these goals. Activities suggested for enrichment and expansion are appropriate.

In language development and beginning reading:

- Read aloud every day and encourage interaction and discussion between children and adults.
- Present printed words within the context of meaningful experiences so that young children can develop the notion that "words are talk written down." The language-experience approach provides such opportunities.
- Incorporate phonics in a variety of language-oriented activities, but be cautious not to overemphasize isolated phonics instruction.
- Allow children to begin writing through unevaluated experimentation—drawing, copying, and invented spelling. Requiring correct formation of letters on a printed line should be delayed until first grade.
- Avoid using basal texts as the only resource for the first grade language arts program.

In physical development:

- Emphasize appropriate time and space requirements for small and large muscle development.
- Underscore the importance of movement and action as opposed to winning or finishing first.
- Eliminate the use of pre-drawn

pictures for children to color as a basis for hand-eye coordination.

In developing mathematical concepts and scientific inquiry:

- Discuss the development of mathematics concepts rather than focusing on just arithmetical operations.
- Depend on hands-on activities to provide the basis for later paper-and-pencil arithmetical operations and to provide a background for development of science concepts and processes.
- Utilize a variety of materials for children to gain understanding of volume, weight, time, space, and number.
- Select materials that cause children to want to make comparisons, classify, order, count, sort, and match.

In aesthetic development:

- Integrate art-type materials into the classroom to be used as avenues for children to express ideas and concepts through projects as opposed to replicating models.
- Utilize Basic Skills Assessment Program objectives as the core for teaching reading, writing, mathematics, and science in the first grade curriculum, which also includes social studies, art, music, physical education, and health.

Continuous assessment is the process of monitoring a child's development specific to curriculum goal areas throughout the school year and providing the next year's teacher with this information for the purpose of curriculum planning.

- Discuss the similarities of the key experiences of the curriculum for four-year-olds and the kindergarten curriculum objectives. They do not need to be formally correlated as they each have a natural correlation to child growth and development.
- Employ observations of children's interactions and responses as well as parental input to assess developmental levels. Singling out children on a one-to-one basis in a test-like situation is not necessary to assess their progress.
- Understand that psychometric (i.e., achievement) tests provide limited information for developmental assessment. Teachers and parents have proven track records for predicting children's abilities, accomplishments, and behavior.
- Document children's progress by using classroom observation to complete forms that have been adopted and are utilized throughout the school and/or district. Review and utilize information gained from the previous teacher's assessment.

The degree or credential provides a foundation of knowledge for teachers. Professionalism develops for teachers on individual and group-level bases through seminars, course work, inservice training, and the like with a direct influence on classroom practices.

- Stress participation in preservice workshops to fulfill the requirement for teachers and aides implementing the child development program. Similar planned preservice orientation should also be provided for new kindergarten teachers, first grade teachers, and all instructional aides.

- Encourage teachers to actively support and participate in professional groups to increase their knowledge of state-of-the-art instructional practices. Strive to increase teachers', administrators', and parents' understandings of child growth and development.
- Promote opportunities for teachers and instructional aides to observe in other classrooms across age levels.
- Plan meetings and training sessions in which teachers of four-, five-, and six-year-olds can meet jointly. Use this support group to discuss specific curriculum topics selected by groups. Include instructional aides in discussions.

The teacher/parent team shares information through open communication related to the individual child's growth and development.

- Realize that time spent in educating parents about the value of play (children's work) in the classroom is time well spent.
- Report to parents through face-to-face conferences. Two parent conferences and two home visits are required in the half-day child development program. Parent conferences are encouraged in both kindergarten and first grade.
- Discuss the uniqueness of each child with his parents. (Avoid "top-group, slow-group" references and other comparisons.) Describe what their child can do and predict what he will learn next.
- Provide parent workshops, take-home activities, and newsletters which reinforce the classroom program and meet the needs of individual children.

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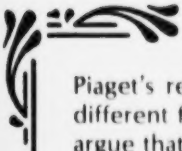
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Piaget's research showed that the mind of the child is qualitatively different from that of older children and adults. This fact led him to argue that the aim of education should be not only to instruct but to provide a formative milieu for the child's indissociable intellectual, moral, and affective development—not just to furnish the mind, but to help form its reasoning power.

Rheta DeVries and Lawrence Kohlberg

